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CULTURAL THEORY AND POPULAR CULTURE

AN INTRODUCTION

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ROUTLEDGE

1 What is popular culture?

Before we consider in detail the different ways historically, theoretically and methodologically, in which popular culture has been defined and analysed, I want to outline some of the general features of the debate that the study of popular culture has generated. It is not my intention to pre-empt the specific findings and arguments that will be presented in the following chapters. Here I simply wish to map out the general conceptual landscape of popular culture. This is, in many ways, a daunting task. Part of the difficulty stems from the implied *otherness* that is always absent/present when we use the term 'popular culture'. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, popular culture is always defined, implicitly or explicitly, in contrast to other conceptual categories: folk culture, mass culture, high culture, dominant culture, working-class culture. A full definition must always take this into account. Moreover, as we shall also see, whichever conceptual category is deployed as popular culture's *absent other*, it will always powerfully affect the connotations brought into play when we use the term 'popular culture'.

Therefore, to study popular culture we must first confront the difficulty posed by the term itself. For it will almost certainly be the case that the kind of analysis we do and the theoretical frame we employ to do this analysis will be largely shaped by the definition of popular culture we use. The main argument that I suspect readers will take from this book is that popular culture is in effect an *empty* conceptual category, one that can be filled in a wide variety of often conflicting ways, depending on the context of use.

Culture

In order to define popular culture we first need to define the term 'culture'. Raymond Williams (1983) calls culture 'one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (87). Williams suggests three broad definitions. First, culture can be used to refer to 'a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development' (90). We could, for example, speak about the cultural development of Western Europe and be referring only to intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic factors – great philosophers, great artists and great poets. This would be a perfectly understandable formulation. A second use of the word 'culture' might be to suggest 'a particular way of life, whether

of a people, a period or a group' (ibid.). Using this definition, if we speak of the cultural development of Western Europe, we would have in mind not just intellectual and aesthetic factors, but the development of, for example, literacy, holidays, sport and religious festivals. Finally, Williams suggests that culture can be used to refer to 'the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity' (ibid.). In other words, culture here means the texts and practices whose principal function is to signify, to produce or to be the occasion for the production of meaning. Culture in this third definition is synonymous with what structuralists and post-structuralists call 'signifying practices' (see Chapter 6). Using this definition, we would probably think of examples such as poetry, the novel, ballet, opera and fine art. To speak of popular culture usually means to mobilize the second and third meanings of the word 'culture'. The second meaning – culture as a particular way of life – would allow us to speak of such practices as the seaside holiday, the celebration of Christmas, and youth subcultures, as examples of culture. These are usually referred to as *lived* cultures or practices. The third meaning – culture as signifying practices – would allow us to speak of soap opera, pop music, and comics as examples of culture. These are usually referred to as texts. Few people would imagine Williams's first definition when thinking about popular culture.

Ideology

Before we turn to the different definitions of popular culture, there is another term we have to think about: ideology. Ideology is a crucial concept in the study of popular culture. Graeme Turner (2003) calls it 'the most important conceptual category in cultural studies' (182). James Carey (1996) has even suggested that 'British cultural studies could be described just as easily and perhaps more accurately as ideological studies' (65). Like culture, ideology has many competing meanings. An understanding of this concept is often complicated by the fact that in much cultural analysis the concept is used interchangeably with culture itself, and especially popular culture. The fact that ideology has been used to refer to the same conceptual terrain as culture and popular culture makes it an important term in any understanding of the nature of popular culture. What follows is a brief discussion of just five of the many ways of understanding ideology. We will consider only those meanings that have a bearing on the study of popular culture.

First, ideology can refer to a systematic body of ideas articulated by a particular group of people. For example, we could speak of 'professional ideology' to refer to the ideas that inform the practices of particular professional groups. We could also speak of the 'ideology of the Labour Party'. Here we would be referring to the collection of political, economic and social ideas that inform the aspirations and activities of the party.

A second definition suggests a certain masking, distortion or concealment. Ideology is used here to indicate how some texts and practices present distorted images of reality. They produce what is sometimes called 'false consciousness'. Such distortions, it is argued, work in the interests of the powerful against the interests of the powerless.

Using this definition, we might speak of capitalist ideology. What would be intimated by this usage would be the way in which ideology conceals the reality of domination from those in power: the dominant class do not see themselves as exploiters or oppressors. And, perhaps more importantly, the way in which ideology conceals the reality of subordination from those who are powerless: the subordinate classes do not see themselves as oppressed or exploited. This definition derives from certain assumptions about the circumstances of the production of texts and practices. It is argued that they are the superstructural 'reflections' or 'expressions' of the power relations of 'the economic structure of society'. This is one of the fundamental assumptions of classical Marxism. Here is Karl Marx's (1976a) famous formulation:

> In the social production of their existence men enter into definite, necessary relations, which are independent of their will, namely, relations of production corresponding to a determinate stage of development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which there arises a legal and political superstructure and to which there correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general (3).

What Marx is suggesting is that the way a society organizes the means of its material production will have a determining effect on the type of culture that society produces or makes possible. The cultural products of this so-called base/superstructure relationship are deemed ideological to the extent that, as a result of this relationship, they implicitly or explicitly support the interests of dominant groups who, socially, politically, economically and culturally, benefit from this particular economic organization of society. In Chapter 4, we shall consider this formulation in more detail.

We can also use ideology in this general sense to refer to power relations outside those of class. For instance, feminists speak of the power of patriarchal ideology, and how it operates to conceal, mask and distort gender relations in our society (see Chapter 8). In Chapter 9 we shall examine the ideology of racism.

A third definition of ideology (closely related to, and in some ways dependent on, the second definition) uses the term to refer to 'ideological forms' (Marx, 1976a: 5). This usage is intended to draw attention to the way in which texts (television fiction, pop songs, novels, feature films, etc.) always present a particular image of the world. This definition depends on a notion of society as conflictual rather than consensual, structured around inequality, exploitation and oppression. Texts are said to take sides, consciously or unconsciously, in this conflict. The German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1978) summarizes the point: 'Good or bad, a play always includes an image of the world. . . . There is no play and no theatrical performance which does not in some way affect the dispositions and conceptions of the audience. Art is never without consequences' (150–1). Brecht's point can be generalized to apply to all texts. Another way of saying this would be simply to argue that all texts are ultimately political. That is, they offer competing ideological significations of the way the world is or should be. Popular

culture is thus, as Hall (2019a) claims, a site where 'collective social understandings are created': a terrain on which 'the politics of signification' are played out in attempts to win people to particular ways of seeing the world (106).

A fourth definition of ideology is one associated with the early work of the French cultural theorist Roland Barthes (discussed in more detail in Chapter 6). Barthes argues that ideology (or 'myth' as Barthes himself calls it) operates mainly at the level of connotations, the secondary, often unconscious, meanings that texts and practices carry, or can be made to carry. For example, a Conservative Party political broadcast transmitted in 1990 ended with the word 'socialism' being transposed into red prison bars. What was being suggested is that the socialism of the Labour Party is synonymous with social, economic and political imprisonment. The broadcast was attempting to fix the connotations of the word 'socialism'. Moreover, it hoped to locate socialism in a binary relationship in which it connoted unfreedom, whilst conservatism connoted freedom. For Barthes, this would be a classic example of the operations of ideology, the attempt to make universal and legitimate what is in fact partial and particular; an attempt to pass off that which is cultural (i.e. humanly made) as something which is natural (i.e. just existing). Similarly, it could be argued that in British society white, masculine, heterosexual, middle class, are unmarked in the sense that they are the 'normal', the 'natural', the 'universal', from which other ways of being are an inferior variation on an original. This is made clear in such formulations as a female pop singer, a black journalist, a working-class writer, a gay comedian. In each instance the first term is used to qualify the second as a deviation from the 'universal' categories of pop singer, journalist, writer and comedian.

A fifth definition is one that was very influential in the 1970s and early 1980s. It is the definition of ideology developed by the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. We shall discuss Althusser in more detail in Chapter 4. Here I will simply outline some key points about one of his definitions of ideology. Althusser's main contention is to see ideology not simply as a body of ideas, but as a material practice. What he means by this is that ideology is encountered in the practices of everyday life and not simply in certain ideas about everyday life. Principally, what Althusser has in mind is the way in which certain rituals and customs have the effect of binding us to the social order: a social order that is marked by enormous inequalities of wealth, status and power. Using this definition, we could describe the seaside holiday or the celebration of Christmas as examples of ideological practices. This would point to the way in which they offer pleasure and release from the usual demands of the social order, but, ultimately, return us to our places in the social order, refreshed and ready to tolerate our exploitation and oppression until the next official break comes along. In this sense, ideology works to reproduce the social conditions and social relations necessary for the economic conditions and economic relations of capitalism to continue.

So far we have briefly examined different ways of defining culture and ideology. What should be clear by now is that culture and ideology do cover much the same conceptual landscape. The main difference between them is that ideology brings a political dimension to the shared terrain. In addition, the introduction of the concept of ideology suggests that relations of power and politics inescapably mark the culture/ideology

landscape; it suggests that the study of popular culture amounts to something more than a simple discussion of entertainment and leisure.

Popular culture

There are various ways to define popular culture. This book is of course in part about that very process, about the different ways in which various critical approaches have attempted to fix the meaning of popular culture. Therefore, all I intend to do for the remainder of this chapter is to sketch out six definitions of popular culture that, in their different, general ways, inform the study of popular culture. But first a few words about the term 'popular'. Williams (1983) suggests four current meanings: 'well liked by many people'; 'inferior kinds of work'; 'work deliberately setting out to win favour with the people'; 'culture actually made by the people for themselves' (237). Clearly, then, any definition of popular culture will bring into play a complex combination of the different meanings of the term 'culture' with the different meanings of the term 'popular'. The history of cultural theory's engagement with popular culture is, therefore, a history of the different ways in which the two terms have been connected by theoretical labour within particular historical and social contexts.

An obvious starting point in any attempt to define popular culture is to say that popular culture is simply culture that is widely favoured or well liked by many people. And, undoubtedly, such a quantitative index would meet the approval of many people. We could examine sales of books, sales of CDs and DVDs. We could also examine attendance records at concerts, sporting events and festivals. We could also scrutinize market research figures on audience preferences for different television programmes. Such counting would undoubtedly tell us a great deal. The difficulty might prove to be that, paradoxically, it tells us too much. Unless we can agree on a figure over which something becomes popular culture, and below which it is just culture, we might find that widely favoured or well liked by many people included so much as to be virtually useless as a conceptual definition of popular culture.

Despite this problem, what is clear is that any definition of popular culture must include a quantitative dimension. The *popular* of popular culture would seem to demand it. What is also clear, however, is that on its own, a quantitative index is not enough to provide an adequate definition of popular culture. Such counting would almost certainly include 'the officially sanctioned "high culture" which in terms of book and record sales and audience ratings for television dramatisations of the classics, can justifiably claim to be "popular" in this sense' (Bennett, 1980: 20–1).

A second way of defining popular culture is to suggest that it is the culture that is left over after we have decided what is high culture. Popular culture, in this definition, is a residual category, there to accommodate texts and practices that fail to meet the required standards to qualify as high culture. In other words, it is a definition of popular culture as inferior culture. What the culture/popular culture test might include is a range of value judgements on a particular text or practice. For example, we might want to insist on formal complexity. In other words, to be real culture, it has to be difficult.

Being difficult thus ensures its exclusive status as high culture. Its very difficulty literally excludes, an exclusion that guarantees the exclusivity of its audience. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that cultural distinctions of this kind are often used to support class distinctions. Taste is a deeply ideological category: it functions as a marker of 'class' (using the term in a double sense to mean both a social economic category and the suggestion of a particular level of quality). For Bourdieu (1984), the consumption of culture is 'predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences' (5). This will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 7, 10, and 12.

This definition of popular culture is often supported by claims that popular culture is mass-produced commercial culture, whereas high culture is the result of an individual act of creation. The latter, therefore, deserves a moral and aesthetic response; the former requires only a fleeting sociological inspection to unlock what little it has to offer. Whatever the method deployed, those who wish to make the case for the division between high and popular culture generally insist that the division between the two is absolutely clear. Moreover, not only is this division clear, it is trans-historical – fixed for all time. This latter point is usually insisted on, especially if the division is dependent on supposed essential textual qualities.

There are many problems with this certainty. For example, William Shakespeare is now seen as the epitome of high culture, yet as late as the nineteenth century his work was very much a part of popular theatre.[1] The same point can also be made about Charles Dickens's work. Similarly, film noir can be seen to have crossed the border supposedly separating popular and high culture: in other words, what started as popular cinema is now the preserve of academics and film clubs.[2] One recent example of cultural traffic moving in the other direction is Luciano Pavarotti's recording of Puccini's 'Nessun Dorma'. Even the most rigorous defenders of high culture would not want to exclude Pavarotti or Puccini from its select enclave. But in 1990, Pavarotti managed to take 'Nessun Dorma' to number one in the British charts. Such commercial success on any quantitative analysis would make the composer, the performer and the aria popular culture.[3] In fact, one student I know actually complained about the way in which the aria had been supposedly devalued by its commercial success. He claimed that he now found it embarrassing to play it for fear that someone should think his musical taste was simply the result of the aria being 'The Official BBC Grandstand World Cup Theme'. Other students laughed and mocked. But his complaint highlights something very significant about the high/popular divide: the elitist investment that some put in its continuation.

On 30 July 1991, Pavarotti gave a free concert in London's Hyde Park. About 250,000 people were expected, but because of heavy rain, the number of those who actually attended was around 100,000. Two things about the event are of interest to a student of popular culture. The first is the enormous popularity of the event. We could connect this with the fact that Pavarotti's previous two albums (*Essential Pavarotti 1* and *Essential Pavarotti 2*) had both topped the British album charts. His obvious popularity would appear to call into question any clear division between high and popular culture. Second, the extent of his popularity would appear to threaten the class exclusivity of a

high/popular divide. It is therefore interesting to note the way in which the event was reported in the media. All the British tabloids carried news of the event on their front pages. The *Daily Mirror*, for instance, had five pages devoted to the concert. What the tabloid coverage reveals is a clear attempt to define the event for popular culture. The *Sun* quoted a woman who said, 'I can't afford to go to posh opera houses with toffs and fork out £100 a seat.' The *Daily Mirror* ran an editorial in which it claimed that Pavarotti's performance 'wasn't for the rich' but 'for the thousands . . . who could never normally afford a night with an operatic star'. When the event was reported on television news programmes the following lunchtime, the tabloid coverage was included as part of the general meaning of the event. Both the BBC's *One O'clock News* and ITV's *12.30 News* referred to the way in which the tabloids had covered the concert, and, moreover, the *extent* to which they had covered the concert. The old certainties of the cultural landscape suddenly seemed in doubt. However, there was some attempt made to reintroduce the old certainties: 'some critics said that a park is no place for opera' (*One O'clock News*); 'some opera enthusiasts might think it all a bit vulgar' (*12.30 News*). Although such comments invoked the spectre of high-culture exclusivity, they seemed strangely at a loss to offer any purchase on the event. The apparently obvious cultural division between high and popular culture no longer seemed so obvious. It suddenly seemed that the cultural had been replaced by the economic, revealing a division between 'the rich' and 'the thousands'. It was the event's very popularity that forced the television news to confront, and ultimately to find wanting, old cultural certainties. This can be partly illustrated by returning to the contradictory meaning of the term 'popular'.[4] On the one hand, something is said to be good because it is popular. An example of this usage would be: it was a popular performance. Yet, on the other hand, something is said to be bad for the very same reason. Consider the binary oppositions in Table 1.1. This demonstrates quite clearly the way in which popular and popular culture carries within its definitional field connotations of inferiority; a second-best culture for those unable to understand, let alone appreciate, real culture – what Matthew Arnold refers to as 'the best that has been thought and said in the world' (see Chapter 2). Hall (2019b) argues that what is important here is not the fact that popular forms move up and down the 'cultural escalator'; more significant are 'the forces and relations which sustain the distinction, the difference . . . [the] institutions and institutional processes . . . required to sustain each and to continually mark the difference between them' (570). This is principally the work of the education system and its promotion of a selective tradition (see Chapter 3).

A third way of defining popular culture is as 'mass culture'. This draws heavily on the previous definition. The mass culture perspective will be discussed in some detail

Table 1.1 Popular culture as 'inferior' culture.

Popular press	Quality press
Popular cinema	Art cinema
Popular entertainment	Art

in Chapter 2; therefore all I want to do here is to suggest the basic terms of this definition. The first point that those who refer to popular culture as mass culture want to establish is that popular culture is a hopelessly commercial culture. It is mass-produced for mass consumption. Its audience is a mass of non-discriminating consumers. The culture itself is formulaic, manipulative (to the political right or left, depending on who is doing the analysis). It is a culture that is consumed with brain-numbed and brain-numbing passivity. But as John Fiske (1989a) points out, 'between 80 and 90 per cent of new products fail despite extensive advertising. . . many films fail to recover even their promotional costs at the box office' (31). Simon Frith (1983: 147) also points out that about 80 per cent of singles and albums lose money. Such statistics should clearly call into question the notion of consumption as an automatic and passive activity (see Chapters 8 and 12).

Those working within the mass culture perspective usually have in mind a previous 'golden age' when cultural matters were very different. This usually takes one of two forms: a lost organic community or a lost folk culture. But as Fiske (1989a) points out, 'In capitalist societies there is no so-called authentic folk culture against which to measure the "inauthenticity" of mass culture, so bemoaning the loss of the authentic is a fruitless exercise in romantic nostalgia' (27). This also holds true for the 'lost' organic community. The Frankfurt School, as we shall see in Chapter 4, locate the lost golden age not in the past, but in the future.

For some cultural critics working within the mass culture paradigm, mass culture is not just an imposed and impoverished culture – it is, in a clear identifiable sense, an imported American culture: 'If popular culture in its modern form was *invented* in any one place, it was. . . in the great cities of the United States, and above all in New York' (Maltby, 1989: 11; my italics). The claim that popular culture is American culture has a long history within the theoretical mapping of popular culture. It operates under the term 'Americanization'. Its central theme is that British culture has declined under the homogenizing influence of American culture. There are two things we can say with some confidence about the United States and popular culture. First, as Andrew Ross (1989) has pointed out, 'popular culture has been socially and institutionally central in America for longer and in a more significant way than in Europe' (7). Second, although the availability of American culture worldwide is undoubted, how what is available is consumed is at the very least contradictory (see Chapter 10). What is true is that in the 1950s (one of the key periods of Americanization), for many young people in Britain, American culture represented a force of liberation against the grey certainties of British everyday life. What is also clear is that the fear of Americanization is closely related to a distrust (regardless of national origin) of emerging forms of popular culture. As with the mass culture perspective generally, there are political left and political right versions of the argument. What are under threat are either the traditional values of high culture, or the traditional way of life of a 'tempted' working class.

There is what we might call a benign version of the mass culture perspective. The texts and practices of popular culture are seen as forms of public fantasy. Popular culture is understood as a collective dream world. As Richard Maltby (1989) claims, popular culture provides 'escapism that is not an escape from or to anywhere, but an

escape of our utopian selves' (14). In this sense, cultural practices such as Christmas and the seaside holiday, it could be argued, function in much the same way as dreams: they articulate, in a disguised form, collective (but repressed) wishes and desires. This is a benign version of the mass culture critique because, as Maltby points out, 'If it is the crime of popular culture that it has taken our dreams and packaged them and sold them back to us, it is also the achievement of popular culture that it has brought us more and more varied dreams than we could otherwise ever have known' (ibid.).

Structuralism, although not usually placed within the mass culture perspective, and certainly not sharing its moralistic approach, nevertheless sees popular culture as a sort of ideological machine that more or less effortlessly reproduces the prevailing structures of power. Readers are seen as locked into specific 'reading positions'. There is little space for reader activity or textual contradiction. Part of post-structuralism's critique of structuralism is the opening up of a critical space in which such questions can be addressed. Chapter 6 will consider these issues in some detail.

A fourth definition contends that popular culture is the culture that originates from 'the people'. It takes issue with any approach that suggests that it is something imposed on 'the people' from above. According to this definition, the term should be used only to indicate an 'authentic' culture of 'the people'. This is popular culture as folk culture: a culture of the people for the people. As a definition of popular culture, it is 'often equated with a highly romanticised concept of working-class culture construed as the major source of symbolic protest within contemporary capitalism' (Bennett, 1980: 27). One problem with this approach is the question of who qualifies for inclusion in the category 'the people'. Another problem with it is that it evades the 'commercial' nature of much of the resources from which popular culture is made. No matter how much we might insist on this definition, the fact remains that people do not spontaneously produce culture from raw materials of their own making. Whatever popular culture is, what is certain is that its raw materials are those that are commercially provided. This approach tends to avoid the full implications of this fact. Critical analysis of pop and rock music is particularly replete with this kind of analysis of popular culture. At a conference I once attended, a contribution from the floor suggested that Levi's jeans would never be able to use a song from the Jam to sell its products. The fact that they had already used a song by the Clash would not shake this conviction. What underpinned this claim was a clear sense of cultural difference – television commercials for Levi's jeans are mass culture; the music of the Jam is popular culture defined as an oppositional culture of 'the people'. The only way the two could meet would be through the Jam 'selling out'. As this was not going to happen, Levi's jeans would never use a song by the Jam to sell its products. But this had already happened to the Clash, a band with equally sound political credentials. This circular exchange came to a stop. The cultural studies use of the concept of hegemony would, at the very least, have fuelled further discussion (see Chapter 4).

A fifth definition of popular culture, then, is one that draws on the political analysis of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, particularly on his development of the concept of hegemony. Gramsci (2019) uses the term 'hegemony' to refer to the way in which dominant groups in society, through a process of 'intellectual and moral

leadership' (69), seek to win the consent of subordinate groups in society. This will be discussed in some detail in Chapter 4. What I want to do here is to offer a general outline of how cultural theorists have taken Gramsci's political concept and used it to explain the nature and politics of popular culture. Those using this approach see popular culture as a site of struggle between the 'resistance' of subordinate groups and the forces of 'incorporation' operating in the interests of dominant groups. Popular culture in this usage is not the imposed culture of the mass culture theorists, nor is it an emerging from below, spontaneously oppositional culture of 'the people' – it is a terrain of exchange and negotiation between the two: a terrain, as already stated, marked by resistance and incorporation. The texts and practices of popular culture move within what Gramsci (1971) calls a 'compromise equilibrium' (161) – a balance that is mostly weighted in the interests of the powerful. The process is historical (labelled popular culture one moment, and another kind of culture the next), but it is also synchronic (moving between resistance and incorporation at any given historical moment). For instance, the seaside holiday began as an aristocratic event and within a hundred years it had become an example of popular culture. Film noir started as despised popular cinema and within thirty years had become art cinema. In general terms, those looking at popular culture from the perspective of hegemony theory tend to see it as a terrain of ideological struggle between dominant and subordinate classes, dominant and subordinate cultures. As Bennett (2019) explains,

> The field of popular culture is structured by the attempt of the ruling class to win hegemony and by forms of opposition to this endeavour. As such, it consists not simply of an imposed mass culture that is coincident with dominant ideology, nor simply of spontaneously oppositional cultures, but is rather an area of negotiation between the two within which – in different particular types of popular culture – dominant, subordinate and oppositional cultural and ideological values and elements are 'mixed' in different permutations (79).

The compromise equilibrium of hegemony can also be employed to analyse different types of conflict within and across popular culture. Bennett highlights class conflict, but hegemony theory can also be used to explore and explain conflicts involving ethnicity, 'race', gender, generation, sexuality, disability, etc. – all are at different moments engaged in forms of cultural struggle against the homogenizing forces of incorporation of the official or dominant culture. The key concept in this use of hegemony theory, especially in post-Marxist cultural studies (see Chapter 4), is the concept of 'articulation' (the word being employed in its double sense to mean both to express and to make a temporary connection). Popular culture is marked by what Chantal Mouffe (1981) calls 'a process of disarticulation–articulation' (231). The Conservative Party political broadcast, discussed earlier, reveals this process in action. What was being attempted was the disarticulation of socialism as a political movement concerned with economic, social and political emancipation, in favour of its articulation as a political movement concerned to impose restraints on individual freedom. Also, as we shall see in Chapter 8, feminism has always recognized the

importance of cultural struggle within the contested landscape of popular culture. Feminist presses have published science fiction, detective fiction and romance fiction. Such cultural interventions represent an attempt to articulate popular genres for feminist politics. It is also possible, using hegemony theory, to locate the struggle between resistance and incorporation as taking place within and across individual popular texts and practices. Raymond Williams (1980) suggests that we can identify different moments within a popular text or practice – what he calls 'dominant', 'emergent' and 'residual' – each pulling the text in a different direction. Thus a text is made up of a contradictory mix of different cultural forces. How these elements are articulated will depend in part on the social circumstances and historical conditions of production and consumption. Hall (1980a) uses Williams's insight to construct a theory of reading positions: 'subordinate', 'dominant' and 'negotiated'. David Morley (1980) has modified the model to take into account discourse and subjectivity: seeing reading as always an interaction between the discourses of the text and the discourses of the reader (see Storey, 2010a).

There is another aspect of popular culture that is suggested by hegemony theory. This is the claim that theories of popular culture are really theories about the constitution of 'the people'. Hall (2019b), for instance, argues that popular culture is a contested site for political constructions of 'the people' and their relation to 'the power bloc' (see Chapter 4). Popular culture 'is organized around the contradiction: popular forces versus the power bloc. . . . But the term 'popular', and even more, the collective subject to which it must refer - 'the people' - is highly problematic (Hall 2019b: 573). Both terms are in effect empty categories that can be filled in different ways. For Hall they have to be constructed, articulated and organized in a struggle against the power bloc.

This is of course to make popular culture a profoundly political concept.

> Popular culture is a site where the construction of everyday life may be examined. The point of doing this is not only academic – that is, as an attempt to understand a process or practice – it is also political, to examine the power relations that constitute this form of everyday life and thus reveal the configurations of interests its construction serves (Turner, 2003: 6).

In Chapter 12, I will consider John Fiske's 'semiotic' use of Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Fiske argues, as does Paul Willis from a slightly different perspective (also discussed in Chapter 12), that popular culture is what people make from the products of the culture industries – mass culture is the repertoire, popular culture is what people actively make from it, actually do with the commodities and commodified practices they consume.

A sixth definition of popular culture is one informed by recent thinking around the debate on postmodernism. This will be the subject of Chapter 10. All I want to do now is to draw attention to some of the basic points in the debate about the relationship between postmodernism and popular culture. The main point to insist on here is the claim that postmodern culture is a culture that no longer recognizes the distinction

between high and popular culture. As we shall see, for some this is a reason to celebrate an end to an elitism constructed on arbitrary distinctions of culture; for others it is a reason to despair at the final victory of commerce over culture. An example of the supposed interpenetration of commerce and culture (the postmodern blurring of the distinction between 'authentic' and 'commercial' culture) can be found in the relationship between television commercials and pop music. For example, there is a growing list of artists who have had hit records as a result of their songs appearing in television commercials. One of the questions this relationship raises is: 'What is being sold: song or product?' I suppose the obvious answer is both. Moreover, it is now possible to buy CDs that consist of the songs that have become successful, or have become successful again, as a result of being used in advertisements. There is a wonderful circularity to this: songs are used to sell products and the fact that they do this successfully is then used to sell the songs. For those with little sympathy for either postmodernism or the celebratory theorizing of some postmodernists, the real question is: 'What is such a relationship doing to culture?' Those on the political left might worry about its effect on the oppositional possibilities of popular culture. Those on the political right might worry about what it is doing to the status of real culture. This has resulted in a sustained debate in cultural studies. The significance of popular culture is central to this debate. This, and other questions, will be explored in Chapter 10. The chapter will also address, from the perspective of the student of popular culture, the question: 'What is postmodernism?'

Finally, what all these definitions have in common is the insistence that whatever else popular culture is, it is definitely a culture that only emerged following industrialization and urbanization. As Williams (1963) argues in the Foreword to *Culture and Society*, 'The organising principle of this book is the discovery that the idea of culture, and the word itself in its general modern uses, came into English thinking in the period which we commonly describe as that of the Industrial Revolution' (11). It is a definition of culture and popular culture that depends on there being in place a capitalist market economy. This of course makes Britain the first country to produce popular culture defined in this historically restricted way. There are other ways to define popular culture, which do not depend on this particular history or these particular circumstances, but they are definitions that fall outside the range of the cultural theorists and the cultural theory discussed in this book. The argument, which underpins this particular periodization of popular culture, is that the experience of industrialization and urbanization changed fundamentally the cultural relations within the landscape of popular culture. Before industrialization and urbanization, Britain had two cultures: a common culture that was shared, more or less, by all classes, and a separate elite culture produced and consumed by a section of the dominant classes in society (see Burke, 1994; Storey, 2003). As a result of industrialization and urbanization, three things happened, which together had the effect of redrawing the cultural map. First of all, industrialization changed the relations between employees and employers. This involved a shift from a relationship based on mutual obligation to one based solely on the demands of what Thomas Carlyle calls the 'cash nexus' (quoted in Morris, 1979: 22). Second, urbanization produced a residential separation of classes. For the first time in

British history there were whole sections of towns and cities inhabited only by working men and women. Third, the panic engendered by the French Revolution – the fear that it might be imported into Britain – encouraged successive governments to enact a variety of repressive measures aimed at defeating radicalism. Political radicalism and trade unionism were not destroyed, but driven underground to organize beyond the influence of middle-class interference and control. These three factors combined to produce a cultural space outside of the paternalist considerations of the earlier common culture. The result was the production of a cultural space for the generation of a popular culture more or less outside the controlling influence of the dominant classes. How this space was filled was a subject of some controversy for the founding fathers of culturalism (see Chapter 3). Whatever we decide was its content, the anxieties engendered by the new cultural space were directly responsible for the emergence of the 'culture and civilization' approach to popular culture (see Chapter 2).

Popular culture as *other*

What should be clear by now is that the term 'popular culture' is not as definitionally obvious as we might have first thought. A great deal of the difficulty arises from the *absent other* which always haunts any definition we might use. It is never enough to speak of popular culture; we have always to acknowledge that with which it is being contrasted. And whichever of popular culture's others we employ – mass culture, high culture, working-class culture, folk culture, etc. – it will carry into the definition of popular culture a specific theoretical and political inflection. 'There is', as Bennett (1982a) indicates, 'no single or "correct" way of resolving these problems; only a series of different solutions which have different implications and effects' (86). The main purpose of this book is to chart the many problems encountered, and the many solutions suggested, in cultural theory's complex engagement with popular culture. As we shall discover, there is a lot of ground between Arnold's view of popular culture as 'anarchy' and Dick Hebdige's (1988) claim that, 'In the West popular culture is no longer marginal, still less subterranean. Most of the time and for most people it simply is culture.' Or, as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (1987) notes, 'popular cultural forms have moved so far towards centre stage in British cultural life that the separate existence of a distinctive popular culture in an oppositional relation to high culture is now in question' (80). This of course makes an understanding of the range of ways of theorizing popular culture all the more important.

This book, then, is about the theorizing that has brought us to our present state of thinking on popular culture. It is about how the changing terrain of popular culture has been explored and mapped by different cultural theorists and different theoretical approaches. It is upon their shoulders that we stand when we think critically about popular culture. The aim of this book is to introduce readers to the different ways in which popular culture has been analysed and the different popular cultures that have been articulated as a result of the process of analysis. For it must be remembered that popular culture is not a historically fixed set of popular texts and practices, nor

is it a historically fixed conceptual category. The object under theoretical scrutiny is both historically variable, and always in part constructed by the very act of theoretical engagement. This is further complicated by the fact that different theoretical perspectives have tended to focus on particular areas of the popular cultural landscape. The most common division is between the study of texts (popular fiction, television, pop music, etc.) and lived cultures or practices (seaside holidays, youth subcultures, the celebration of Christmas, etc.). The aim of this book, therefore, is to provide readers with a map of the terrain to enable them to begin their own explorations, to begin their own mapping of the main theoretical and political debates that have characterized the study of popular culture.

The contextuality of meaning

At the beginning of this chapter, in the initial discussion of the difficulties involved in defining popular culture, I said 'The main argument that I suspect readers will take from this book is that popular culture is in effect an *empty* conceptual category, one that can be filled in a wide variety of often conflicting ways, depending on the context of use'. As the claim suggests, context is always crucial to an understanding of what something means. But what is a context? The word context comes into English in the late fifteenth century. It derives from the Latin words *contextus*, meaning to join together, and *contexere*, meaning to weave together. Knowing its origins helps us to understand its current use.

First, contexts are the other texts that make a particular text fully meaningful. These other texts *join together* with the text in question to produce meaning. If, in the course of a conversation, you use the word 'it', your meaning will only become clear if you provide a context that indicates to what it refers. When a student tells me, 'It is a difficult book', it only becomes fully meaningful if she explains that she is talking about Karl Marx's *Capital* – it and *Capital* join together to make her meaning clear. However, we should not think of contexts as only texts being joined with other texts. When we try to make sense of a text we always bring to it a set of presuppositions, which provide a framework for our analysis. These assumptions help construct a specific context for our understanding of the text – these are *woven together* around the text to be analysed. For example, to understand Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897) in terms of the 'New Woman' we have to situate the book in the historical context of its first publication. Establishing this context allows us to read the novel in a very particular way. However, if we use psychoanalysis or feminism to interpret the novel, it is this mode of analysis that produces the context for our understanding of the novel. In these examples *Dracula* is articulated (i.e. made to mean) in relation to other texts supplied by a particular historical or theoretical perspective. In other words, the novel will seem very different if the context of our analysis is the theoretical presuppositions of feminism or psychoanalysis or our assumptions about the historical moment of the book's first publication. In these ways, then, contexts are both the co-texts of a text (the texts we join to a particular text) and the inter-texts brought to the text by a reader (the texts we weave around

a particular text in order to fully understand it). The first is an extension of the text in question and the second is something that helps to construct a new understanding of the text. For example, Marx's *Capital* is a co-text that completes the meaning of what the student is telling me, whereas feminism is a body of inter-texts that can be used as a frame for producing a particular understanding of *Dracula*.

Another way of saying everything I have said about texts and contexts is simply to say texts do not have intrinsic meanings; meaning is something that a text acquires in a particular context. In other words, there is no 'text in itself' untroubled by context and reader activity: texts are always read and understood in relation to other texts. But a context is only ever a temporary fixing of meaning, as contexts change meaning changes. We might use the word 'it' many times during the course of a day and on each occasion what it refers to – what it is joined with – might be different. The student who told me, 'It is a difficult book' would change the meaning of 'it' by telling me she was talking about *Marxism and Literature* by Raymond Williams or Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production*. In each case 'it' will mean something quite different. Take, for example, the Union Jack, the national flag of the UK. It can signify different things in a variety of contexts. Flying over a colonial outpost it may signify either imperialism or a civilizing mission; over the casket of a dead soldier it may signify honour and bravery or a pointless loss of life; as worn by Mods and post-Mods and those associated with BritPop it signifies 'cool Britannia'; displayed at a political rally it usually signifies right-wing politics; worn over the shoulders of a British athlete after winning an Olympic medal it signifies national sporting achievement; burned in another country it signifies opposition to British foreign policy. The meaning of the flag is always contextual – its meaning changes as it is situated in different contexts.

The texts that establish contexts can be anything that enables and constrains meaning. For example, watching television is rarely like reading a book. Whereas we tend to read in silence as we concentrate on the words on the page, eating, drinking, chatting, playing with children, tidying up, and a whole range of other activities, often accompany watching television. This is the context for most television viewing and unless we take it seriously we will not understand what we call 'watching television'. We should not of course think of a context as something stable and fixed, waiting passively for the inclusion of a particular text. Just as a context enables and constrains the meaning of a text, a text constrains and enables the meaning of a context – it is an active and interactive relationship. For example, feminism's encounter with *Dracula* changed the meaning of the novel, but working on the novel changes what counts as feminism. Similarly, situating *Dracula* in its original historical moment of emergence changes how we see this particular historical period. And watching television changes how we eat, drink, chat, play with children or tidy up. A door can be both an exit and an entrance; although the materiality of the door remains the same, what it signifies depends on the context in which we view it.

To conclude this brief discussion of contextuality, we understand things in contexts; we also create contexts by our modes of understanding, and contexts change as a consequence of our inclusion of a particular text. Possible contexts for a text are almost endless. The chapters that follow will offer many examples of contextual analysis.

Notes

1. For an excellent discussion of Shakespeare as popular culture in nineteenth-century America, see Lawrence Levine (1988).
2. Slavoj Žižek (1992) identifies the retroactive evaluation that fixed film noir's current status: 'It started to exist only when it was discovered by French critics in the '50s (it is no accident that even in English, the term used to designate this genre is French: *film noir*). What was, in America itself, a series of low-budget B-productions of little critical prestige, was miraculously transformed, through the intervention of the French gaze, into a sublime object of art, a kind of film pendant to philosophical existentialism. Directors who had in America the status of skilled craftsmen, at best, became *auteurs*, each of them staging in his films a unique tragic vision of the universe' (112).
3. For a discussion of opera in popular culture, see Storey, 2002a, 2003, 2006 and 2010a.
4. See Storey, 2003 and 2005.

Further reading

Storey, John (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 5th edn, London: Routledge, 2019. This is the companion volume to the previous edition of this book. An interactive website is also available (www.routledge.com/cw/storey), which contains helpful student resources and a glossary of terms for each chapter.

Agger, Ben, *Cultural Studies as Cultural Theory*, London: Falmer Press, 1992. As the title implies, this is a book about cultural studies written from a perspective sympathetic to the Frankfurt School. It offers some useful commentary on popular culture, especially Chapter 2: 'Popular culture as serious business'.

Allen, Robert C. (ed.), *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, London: Routledge, 1992. Although this collection is specifically focused on television, it contains some excellent essays of general interest to the student of popular culture.

Bennett, Tony, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott (eds), *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986. An interesting collection of essays, covering both theory and analysis.

Brooker, Peter, *A Concise Glossary of Cultural Theory*, London: Edward Arnold, 1999. A brilliant glossary of the key terms in cultural theory.

Day, Gary (ed.), *Readings in Popular Culture*, London: Macmillan, 1990. A mixed collection of essays, some interesting and useful, others too unsure about how seriously to take popular culture.

Du Gay, Paul, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay and Keith Negus, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, London: Sage, 1997. An excellent introduction to some of the key issues in cultural studies. Certainly worth reading for the explanation of 'the circuit of culture'.

Fiske, John, *Reading the Popular*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1989. A collection of essays analysing different examples of popular culture.

Fiske, John, *Understanding Popular Culture*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1989. A clear presentation of his particular approach to the study of popular culture.

Goodall, Peter, *High Culture, Popular Culture: The Long Debate*, St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1995. The book traces the debate between high and popular culture, with particular, but not exclusive, reference to the Australian experience, from the eighteenth century to the present day.

Milner, Andrew, *Contemporary Cultural Studies*, 2nd edn, London: UCL Press, 1994. A useful introduction to contemporary cultural theory.

Mukerji, Chandra and Michael Schudson (eds), *Rethinking Popular Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. A collection of essays, with an informed and interesting introduction. The book is helpfully divided into sections on different approaches to popular culture: historical, anthropological, sociological and cultural.

Naremore, James and Patrick Brantlinger, *Modernity and Mass Culture*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991. A useful and interesting collection of essays on cultural theory and popular culture.

Storey, John, *Inventing Popular Culture*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003. An historical account of the concept of popular culture.

Storey, John, *Culture and Power in Cultural Studies: The Politics of Signification*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010. Extends many of the arguments in this book into more detailed areas of research.

Storey, John (ed.), *The Making of English Popular Culture*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016. An excellent collection of essays on the historical development of English popular culture.

Strinati, Dominic, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, London: Routledge, 1995. A clear and comprehensive introduction to theories of popular culture.

Tolson, Andrew, *Mediations: Text and Discourse in Media Studies*, London: Edward Arnold, 1996. An excellent introduction to the study of popular media culture.

Turner, Graeme, *British Cultural Studies*, 3rd edn, London: Routledge, 2003. Still the best introduction to British cultural studies.

Walton, David, *Introducing Cultural Studies: Learning Through Practice*, London: Sage, 2008. Another excellent introduction to cultural studies: useful, informative and funny.

Walton, David, *Doing Cultural Theory*, London: Sage, 2012. An excellent introduction to cultural theory.